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Frontispiece.

PLÂN-AN-GUARE.

THE OLD CORNISH DRAMA

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM ANCIENT CORNISH SACRED POEMS AND MIRACLE PLAYS OF OTHER LANDS

(*A LECTURE*)

THURSTAN C. PETER

LONDON
ELLIOT STOCK, 62, PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.
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THE OLD CORNISH DRAMA

IF you take up an ordinary history of English literature you will find a more or less complete notice of the mystery and miracle plays, followed by a remark to the effect that there are some in the ancient Cornish tongue, but otherwise similar to those found elsewhere. As a matter of fact, however, our Cornish plays have their own characteristics, and even were they identical with the more celebrated ones of England would nevertheless deserve our attention. Before noticing them in detail, I would warn you of what seems obvious, but which nevertheless we are all very apt to forget—namely, that these plays were composed at a time when the humour of the people was very different from what it is now. Nothing changes more than the sense of humour from age to age, and, indeed, people in different stages of culture look on things from entirely different points of view. It is the same in everything. Neither art, nor literature, nor the events of daily life can be understood by us so long as we look at them merely from our own point of view without making an effort to grasp the points of view of their authors.

Most of our quarrels, especially on religious and political matters, have little in them beyond a difference of temperament and a want of the dramatic capacity that would enable us to understand each other's point of view. Accordingly, when we find in the religious drama of the thirteenth and three following centuries passages of deep pathos or of great religious fervour in the closest juxtaposition with comic passsages that now seem to us vulgar, and others that depart so far from our modern standard of reverence as to seem profane, we must recollect that the audiences for whom they were intended heard them in a different spirit from that which we feel possible. As to the apparent indelicacy and profanity of some of these plays, as often as not they are merely the effect of outspokenness, and are far less objectionable than the innuendoes frequent in modern literature. The simple untrained mind, moreover, can pass from grave to gay, and from gay to grave, with an alacrity that is to others impossible.

In Chaucer, as in our modern Shakespeare, these opposite elements are fused, but Chaucer is the *only* medieval writer who succeeded in doing this. In the miracle plays they are distinct, and to pass—as, *e.g.*, in the Towneley play—from the vulgar jesting of the shepherds, one of whom has stolen a sheep and hidden it in a cot, pretending that it is his wife's new-born babe, to the angels' song of *Gloria in excelsis*, gives to the modern mind a painful shock. Even in the Chester plays, which are far more refined than most, the nagging of Noah's wife jars when mixed with the speeches

of the Almighty. In some plays Noah thrashes his nagging wife; in others she knocks him down. In one Cornish play she sets a better example: 'Oh, master dear, I will do all you wish.' There is, indeed, but little coarseness and profanity in our Cornish plays, and this alone entitles them to more consideration than they have generally received. I only know two passages that I would not read aloud in the family circle—only two places where the writers can be censured for 'kissing carrion.'

Another marked difference between our ancestors and ourselves is this: we judge a play by the manner in which it is put on the stage, laying such importance on the management and stage carpentry that we really care very little for the meaning of the play itself. Our ancestors were in that happy stage in which are still many of our less 'cultured' brothers, and could enjoy and learn lessons from the thing signified, no matter how grotesquely it might be presented.

I may say at once that I do not purpose making any distinction between mysteries and miracle plays, the former dealing with scriptural subjects, the latter with the lives of saints. The distinction is hard to keep up, as in England and Cornwall the same play will often partake of the character of each. I may remark in passing that the name 'mystery' has nothing to do with the mysterious; the word should properly be spelt with an 'i,' being formed, as it is, from *ministerium*, and meaning a performance by the ministers of the church; for the plays in the beginning were an

outcome from ceremonies in the church itself.* This is not the time to trace the varying attitude of the church towards dramatic performances, at times shrinking from them in horror at their degradation, at other times endeavouring to purify the stage and make it useful for the spread of truth and knowledge, at times yielding to ill itself, and permitting and assisting at performances that would disgrace any age. But it is easy to exaggerate this last phase, and I think anyone who has studied the subject must conclude that, on the whole, the attitude of the clergy was based on a desire for good.

At Yuletide and at Easter ceremonies took place in church—and in many places do so still—which, to my mind, were both picturesque and edifying, such, for instance, as the laying of the crucifix beneath the altar, or in a special sepulchre on Good Friday, and its elevation on Easter Monday, while clergymen, representing the three Maries and the angel, sang appropriate verses.†

What can be more picturesque than the coloured illuminations that may still be seen near the altars of some churches at Yuletide representing the infant Saviour in His cradle, with Joseph and the Virgin Mother watching Him, while an ox and an ass are feeding close at hand? Some seven centuries ago that most interesting of the medieval saints, Francis of Assisi, represented the same scene by his forest altar, but his child, his men,

* A platform behind the altar of a church in Norfolk is believed to have been used for stage purposes.

† At Stratton is an Easter sepulchre, date *circa* 1540.

his women, his ox, and his ass were alive. To many, perhaps, the simplicity of mind that can get profit from such a scene is a subject only for contempt; for my part, I confess, it is a simplicity I should be glad to be able to regain.

We read of rustic places in Italy where children join the Corpus Christi day procession, some toddling along in skins and with staff to represent the Baptist, others in sackcloth as the Magdalene, some in blue robes and tinsel crown as the Virgin, while some do not hesitate to wear aureoles and personate the infant Saviour. At Norwich, in the fifteenth century, a boy—or, as the old book says, 'a knave child innocent'—was led through the town carrying a candle to represent the child martyr St. William, alleged to have been murdered in the twelfth century by Jews—a strange story which has played a prominent part in the massacres of Jews in Russia.

The first appearance of dramatic dialogue in the services of the church has been traced to the ninth century, when 'tropes,' as they were called, were introduced into the music of the antiphons and elsewhere in the service. From the *Concordia Regularis*, drawn up about A.D. 959 by Ethelwold, bishop of Winchester, I quote the following as translated in Mr. Chambers' book, 'The Medieval Stage':

'While the third lesson is being chanted, let four brethren vest themselves. Let one of these, vested in an alb, enter as though to take part in the service, and let him approach the sepulchre without attracting attention, and sit there quietly

with a palm in his hand. While the third respond is being chanted, let the remaining three follow, and let them all, vested in copes, bearing in their hands thuribles with incense, and stepping delicately, as those who seek something, approach the sepulchre. These things are done in imitation of the angel sitting in the monument, and the women with spices coming to anoint the body of Jesus. When, therefore, he who sits there beholds the three approach him like folk lost and seeking something, let him begin in a dulcet voice of medium pitch to sing *Quem quæritis.*

'And when he has sung it to the end, let the three reply in unison *Ihesum Nazarenum.* So he, *Non est hic: surrexit sicut prædixerat. Ite, nuntiate quia surrexit a mortuis.* At the words of this bidding let those three turn to the choir and say, *Alleluia! resurrexit Dominus!* This said, let the one, still sitting there, and as if recalling them, say the anthem *Venite et videte locum.*

'And saying this let him rise and lift the veil, and show them the place bare of the cross, but only the cloths laid there in which the cross was wrapped. And when they have seen this, let them set down the thuribles which they bare in that same sepulchre, and take the cloth and hold it up in the face of the clergy, and, as if to demonstrate that the Lord has risen, and is no longer wrapped therein, let them sing the anthem *Surrexit Dominus de sepulchro,* and lay the cloth upon the altar. When the anthem is done, let the priest, sharing in their gladness at the triumph of our

King, in that, having vanquished death, He rose again, begin the hymn *Te Deum laudamus*. And this begun, all the bells chime out together.'

To the minds of us moderns, who expect realism in everything, especially in dramatic representations, and who resent nothing so much as having, if I may use a child's phrase, to 'make believe,' it no doubt seems incongruous that all parts should have been taken by men. To the man of the middle ages this 'make believe' was so easy, so much a matter of course, that it did not even strike him as incongruous when in an early play of the 'Massacre of the Innocents' the two-year old little victims were personated by the choir boys, and their mothers by the monks.

Doubtless these representations were liable to abuse, as is everything else.

About the year 990 the Patriarch of Constantinople caused the *Feast of Fools*, and the *Feast of the Ass*, and other such farces, to be enacted in the Greek Church. The *Feast of Fools* was represented by mock bishops and priests attired as pantomine players. Outside the church they shaved the Precentor of Fools on a platform erected for the purpose, the chief amusement being derived from the precentor's indecent sayings and doings during the performance. They then entered the church, accompanied by laymen in masks representing monsters, or sometimes with their face smutted over. Some personated women, and in that character did things which will not bear repeating. During divine service they sang dirty songs, ate puddings off the altar, played at dice by

the side of the priest celebrating mass, and ran all over the church playing the fool. At the conclusion of the so-called service the bishop was put into a cart, and drawn round the town, followed by another cart full of filth, which was thrown on the spectators as they passed. For about 200 years this spectacle formed one of the church ceremonies, and was known as the 'December liberties.'

The *Feast of the Ass* seems to have been only less objectionable. The particular ass thus honoured was made of wood, and, like the Trojan horse, contained a man. It was ridden by Balaam, who sported an immense pair of spurs. I need not follow the ceremony beyond mentioning that the ass was taken into the church, and (appropriately enough) clad in the garb of the priests who took it there—the choir singing a hymn in its honour of two verses, of which the following is a translation:

> 'From the country of the east
> Came this strong and handsome beast,
> This able ass, beyond compare,
> Heavy loads and packs to bear.
> Huzza, seignor ass, huzza!
>
> 'Amen! bray, most honour'd ass,
> Sated now with grain and grass—
> Amen repeat, Amen reply.
> Huzza, seignor ass, huzza!'

These, with the performance of the *Boy Bishop*, were the principal mock festivals of the clergy.

Unfortunately, since William Hone dragged all these degradations to light, ignoring all other

phases, people have taken them as representing the normal attitude of the medieval clergy towards the dramatic representation of sacred subjects. The whole subject is one well worthy of treatment, and full of interest, but time necessitates my passing to my more immediate subject.

Dramatic representations, in the strict sense, seem to have been unknown in England prior to the Norman Conquest.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries these plays were performed in the churches, but in the fifteenth and later centuries, on the Continent and in England, they were mostly performed in the open air by the different craft gilds,* those wonderful trade associations of which every town had one or more (the rules of a Helston one survive), and of which the great livery companies of London and elsewhere are the present day representatives. First, the civic authorities having decided on performing a cycle of plays, allotted them to the different gilds, one to the tanners, one to the tapsters, another to the pinners, and so on, the York cycle, *e.g.*, having no less than forty-eight separate plays. The chiefs of each gild appeared before the magistrates, and were (with all the picturesque ceremony that our forefathers so dearly loved) bound over to select

* For performances in church, at St. Mary's, Leicester, 1491 and 1499, and at Bewdley in 1572, see Clarke's 'Miracle Play in England,' p. 12. In 1542 Bonner, bishop of London, by proclamation forbad this in his diocese. In 1300 the clergy were allowed to perform the resurrection and the nativity in church, but not to act in the open.

the best performers they could get, not necessarily from their members—indeed, strolling players seem to have been often engaged, and probably without much difficulty, for the pay was high—for example, in 1490, the gild of the smiths paid the performers for the first rehearsal, from 14d. for the minstrels to 4s. for Pilate. These were large sums when (as the same accounts show) a rib of beef could be had for 3d., and a quart of wine for 2d. In addition they had their costumes provided for them, and refreshments were supplied.* There was frequently a curious fitness in the allotment of the parts. Thus at Chester the shipwrights were responsible for the play of the building of the ark, the tapsters for the marriage in Cana, the water drawers for the flood. As soon as the players were selected and their characters assigned to them, they were solemnly sworn to learn their parts properly by a fixed date. Those who did not perform, nevertheless, had tasks assigned to them. At York, in 1413, the members of no less than ten gilds carried torches to add brightness to the show. All being thus arranged, the 'bans' were called by gaily dressed heralds riding through the town. No early bans are known to exist, but we have that of the Chester plays in 1600, one verse of which I quote as a comment on the comic part.

We are told that the play was the device of Done Rondall of Chester Abbey (meaning the celebrated Randall Higden, who died there in 1364, after being a monk of Chester for no less than sixty-five years. He was the author of a

* Pollard, 'English Miracle Plays,' XXVII.

history of the world, that he called Polychronicon, and that was translated by the Cornishman, John de Trevisa, who is by some believed to have been the translator of 'Wycliffe's Bible.'

> 'This moonke, moonke-like, in Scriptures well seene,
> In storyes travilled with the beste sorte,
> In pagentes set fourth apparently to all eyne
> The olde and newe testament, with livelye comforth,
> Interminglinge therewith, onely to make sporte,
> Some thinges not warranted by any writt,
> Which to gladd the hearers he woulde men to take yt.'

Each gild had its own pageant on a wagon drawn by horses or oxen. It drove to the place appointed, performed its play, and then, on the herald's orders, moved on to the next station, making room for another pageant. Without quitting his seat, the citizen could see the whole succession from the creation of the world to the doomsday of mankind.

The procedure in Cornwall seems to have been entirely different. Here we had fixed theatres, some of which have survived to day, and are still known as plân an guare, or the place of the guare or play.* The arrangement of these for a performance is by no means clear, but, so far as I can make out from the stage directions and the few rude sketches that have survived, I take it to have been something like this. In the centre would be erected the fixed pageant, a

* It is quite probable that the plân an guare that we have are earthworks of an earlier age adapted. The theatres spoken of by Carew in the passage quoted below must have been of a less substantial character.

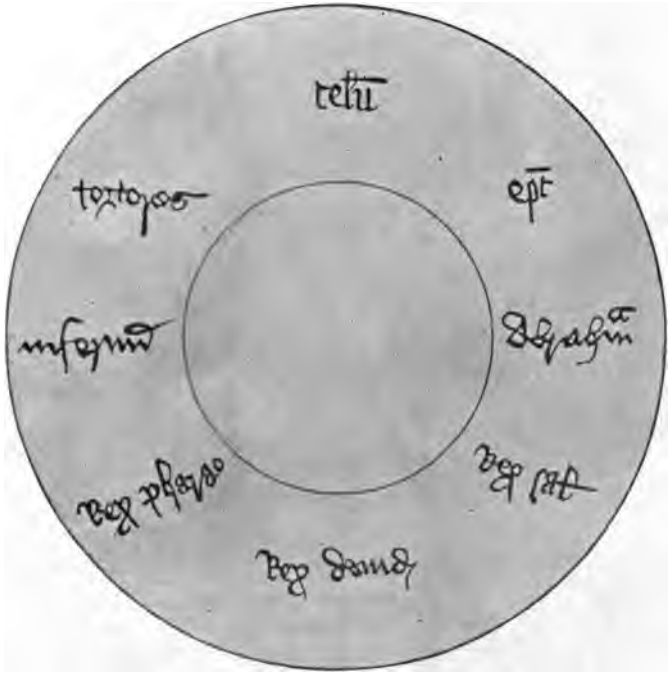
platform with sometimes an upper storey to represent heaven, and a lower one for hell. Around this a series of tents representing the residences of the principal characters, and, in some cases at any rate, heaven and hell were located in these tents (see illustration).

Sometimes, as during a part of the play of *St. Meriasek*, the stage plan of which has survived, the centre of the area was occupied by a church, while heaven, hell, the Pope's palace, the Emperor's court, and so on, were arranged around in a circle.* From this arrangement a modern theatre seems a far cry, yet its pedigree can be traced step by step.

The fact that in Cornwall the plays were not divided into small sections, each taken by a separate group of actors, but that they continued for hours at a time, and apparently by the same players, probably explains another difference between Cornish and other performances. As we have seen, in England the actors had to learn

* In a plan of the stage preserved in the *Chester Mysteries* is a deep ditch around the circle, and a note to the effect that, if a ditch cannot be made, bars must be erected and 'lete nowth over many stytelerys (*hodie* sticklers) be w^t^inne the place.' In the centre of the circle is a castle, and outside the ditch are stages for different characters.

The sixteenth-century theatre in the fields outside London was very similar except that the enclosing circle was a wooden erection, like a grand stand with a roof. The centre was occupied by the actor's house, as it was called, which served the purpose of wings and green-room, and in front of it a movable platform, on which the performance took place, and which was put away when the ring was required for bear-baiting or fencing match.



PLAN FROM 'ORDINALE DE ORIGINE MUNDI.'

(By permission of the Clarendon Press.)

[*To face p.* 12.

their parts, in Cornwall they repeated them after a prompter, a fact that led to an amusing incident related by dear old Carew in his 'Survey.'

'The guary miracle (in English, a miracle play) is a kind of interlude, compiled in Cornish out of some scripture history with that grossness which accompanied the old Roman comedy.* For representing it, they raise an earthen amphitheatre in some open field, having the diameter of its enclosed plain some 40 or 50 foot. The country people flock from all sides, many miles off, to hear and see it; for they have therein devils and devices to delight as well the eye as the ear; the players con not their parts without book, but are prompted by one called the ordinary, who followeth at their back with the book in his hand and telleth them softly what they must pronounce aloud, which manner once gave occasion to a pleasant conceited gentleman of practising a merry prank: for he undertaking (perhaps of set purpose) an actor's room, was accordingly lessoned before hand by the ordinary, that he must say after him. His turn came: quoth the ordinary, "Go forth, man, and shew thyself." The gentleman steps out upon the stage, and, like a bad clerk in scripture manners, cleaving more to the letter than the sense, pronounced those words aloud. "Oh" (says the fellow softly in his ear) "you mar all the play." And with this his passion, the actor makes the audience in like sort acquainted.

* Probably Carew refers to the 'gag,' which very probably was at times coarse.

Hereon the prompter falls to flat railing and cursing in the bitterest terms he could devise: which the gentleman with a set gesture and countenance still soberly related, until the ordinary, driven at last into a mad rage, was fain to give over all. Which trousse, though it brake off the interlude, yet defrauded not the beholders, but dismissed them with a great deal more sport and laughter, than 20 such guares could have afforded.'

From this, too, I conclude that in Cornwall the play was spoken and not sung as it certainly was at times elsewhere. Indeed, music must have been almost essential to the satisfactory representation of plays whose primary object was recitation, and not dramatic effect. Some of the music has survived and reminds one of ordinary plainsong.*

The earliest record of a performance in Cornwall of which I am aware was at Sancreed about 1568, when Quenall, servant of Sir John Trevrye, quarrelled with one Richard Veane. They went outside and fought, Veane was slain, Quenall confined in Conerton gaol and then hanged on Conerton Downs, in spite of the efforts of his master, himself at the time a sanctuary man at St. Buryan.†

The Cornish plays still surviving are *Gwreans an bys*, or *The Creation of the World*, apparently composed in 1611 by William Jordan of Wen-

* Specimens are printed in Miss Toulmin Smith's 'York Mystery Plays.'

† Sandys in *Journ. R.I.C.*, vol. i., part iii., p. 18.

dron, and founded on the *Origo Mundi*, which is one of a series of three plays, of which the other two deal with the passion and resurrection of Christ. These three are usually spoken of together as the *Ordinalia*, a word meaning the orders of church service, and, in this connection, showing the sense in which the plays were regarded. The other surviving Cornish play is *Beunans Meriasek*, or *The Life of Meriasek*. I purpose speaking of each of these separately.

The first modern editions of any of these were by Mr. Davies Gilbert, who in 1827 edited the *Gwreans an bys*, with a translation.

He had the year before edited a Cornish religious poem, the 'Pascon agon Arluth,' under the name of 'Mount Calvary.' His productions are now only valued as curiosities, owing to the extraordinary number of mistakes they contain. Of the *Gwreans an bys* it has been said, 'Moderately speaking there are eight errors in every stanza.'

Since then they have all been edited by such scholars as Norris and Whitley Stokes, but edited only for the exhibition of their philological interest, the translation in each case being baldly word for word, a fact that makes them to one unacquainted with the Cornish very difficult reading.

I think, however, the difficulty is well worth conquering.

There is one characteristic that runs through the whole of them, and that is the way in which the scenes are *localized*, sometimes with a strange effect. David gives the messenger, who brings

him news of the progress of the temple, the estates of Carnsew and Trehembys; Solomon for a like cause bestows Bosvene, Lostwithiel, and Lanerchy, and to his foreman mason gives Budock and Carrak Ruan.

One of the executioners of Christ boasts that there is not a smith in all Cornwall who can blow the bellows better than himself, and another that there is not a fellow west of Hayle who can bore a better hole than he. Do not for a moment suppose that these local references are a peculiarity of our Cornish plays. In a play of *The Creation of the World* acted at Lisbon as late as 1812, and in many ways resembling our Cornish play, Noah is advised by the Almighty to get the ark constructed by John Golzalvez, of the king's dock-yard at Lisbon, he being a far better shipwright than can be found either in France or England. The same occurs in almost every play. It does not really mislead in literature any more than in art, and no one who sees the beautiful Madonna di San Sisto really believes that Pope Sextus was contemporary with the Virgin, or, because in windows at St. Neot he finds angels bearing the shields of Valletort and Luccombe, and standing in the presence of the Virgin, concludes that those families were living at that date.

The *Gwreans an bys* appears to be based on the *Origo Mundi* which we shall next notice, unless indeed all our Cornish plays are merely translations from English or Continental plays. But in many ways it is an improvement, the dialogue is better and the arrangement more

artistic. It also includes scenes omitted from the earlier play, as, *e.g.*, the fall of Lucifer. It may be that the sublimity with which Milton has clothed the war in heaven, and the fall of Lucifer and his angels 'through endless ruin and combustion down to bottomless perdition,' makes one intolerant of any less dignified treatment. At any rate I confess that the scene in this Cornish play is feeble in the extreme. The stage direction gives some idea of the machinery employed:

'Let them fight wth swordis and in the end Lucyfer voydeth and goeth downe to hell apareled fowle wth fyre about hem turning to hell and every degre of devylls of lether and spirytis on cordis runing into ye playne and so remayne there, 9 angells after Lucyfer goeth to hell.'

This stage direction you will notice is in *English*, as are the majority. They were probably inserted about Elizabeth's time, when the movement in favour of scenic effects began, a movement that has now grown to such an extent that the stage carpenter seems likely to displace the dramatist.

Other scenes found here and not in the *Origo* are the death of Cain at the hands of Lamech (an incident based on a tradition related by St. Jerome and, like so many other interesting legends, painted in the windows at St. Neot's), the translation of Enoch to Paradise, from which he is again taken in the harrowing of hell; and the erection by Seth of two pillars, the one of marble, and the one of brick, wherein to preserve from destruction

by the flood the books in which he had caused to be written the history of all things from the beginning of the world.

For the rest, the plays are practically identical so far as the earlier one extends—namely, from the fall of Lucifer and creation of the world to the abating of Noah's flood.

Some of the stage directions read very quaintly: 'Adam and Eve aparlet in whytt lether in a place apoynted by the conveyour, and not to be sene tyll they be called and thei knell and ryse'; 'Let Paradyce be fynelye made wyth 11° fayre trees in yt and an appell upon the tree and som other frute one the other'; 'A fowntaine in Paradice and fyne flowers in yt painted,' and so on. Indeed there seem to have been little pains spared in the staging of the piece. We may smile at the directions for 'a fyne serpent made wth a virgyn face and yolowe heare upon her head,' but it was the traditional serpent familiar to us in pictures, and must, at any rate, have taken trouble to prepare. This serpent is well portrayed at St. Neot's.

The serpent that (in a rather dramatic scene in *Gwreans an bys*) misleads Eve was large enough to accommodate the man impersonating Lucifer inside its skin, the crawling in and crawling out again being all done in full view. The stage directions of *Gwreans an bys* are more elaborate than usual, and, I may add, generally more ridiculous. On the whole, however, it must be pronounced as of a distinctly high tone, and is remarkable not only for what it contains but for

what it omits of the scenes so frequent in non-Cornish plays. We have no silly quarrel between Noah and his wife, no drunkenness of Noah, no ribald jokes.

Such passages as Cain's abuse of Abel, Tubal's mocking of Noah, the 'great noise' whenever any one goes to hell—all these things are evidently intended in good faith and not meant to raise a laugh.

May I digress a minute to relate an incident that occurred at Penryn in 1587? A small body of Spaniards had landed, hoping to sack the town. They found the streets deserted, and were proceeding to their mischief when suddenly a mighty shout near by alarmed them, and they fled to their boats. The good people of Penryn were witnessing the miracle play of Samson. The gates of Gaza had just fallen, and the crowd had raised a deafening cheer.

In the first of the three plays of the *Ordinalia*, we have a series of scenes from the creation of the world to the completion of Solomon's temple, followed by a short scene in which the first 'bishop' of the new temple puts Maximilla to death for being a Christian. Anachronisms of this kind are of frequent occurrence in the early drama. Our Cornish plays have nothing so startling as some continental ones, where Seth quotes Moses, or Solomon discusses the fables of Æsop over a mug of beer. Hans Sachs, a Nuremburg shoemaker of the early sixteenth century, in his drama, *Eve's unlike children*, represents the deity as hearing little Abel and Seth repeat the Lord's

Prayer, and answer questions out of Luther's catechism. In this Cornish play, the high priest is no doubt called 'bishop' merely to make it clearer to the ignorant spectators, and the startling anachronism of Christianity in the time of Solomon is apparently introduced solely to enable the old 'legend of the cross' to be more completely followed out. This legend I will note directly, but first of the oil of mercy referred to here and in *Gwreans an bys*. The outline of this beautiful legend will be found in the books that have supplied so many scenes to art and to medieval literature, the Apocryphal gospels. The story was amplified in the old English poem, 'Cursor Mundi,' which seems to have been the quarry where the play-writers dug. There are passages in our Cornish and other plays that are clearly traceable to that source.

I trust you will pardon my again referring to St. Neot's windows. We are all fond of complaining that we cannot afford to travel, and so get no opportunity of seeing medieval art. There is plenty to be learned even by those of us who stay at home. Our bench ends can teach us much, and our coloured windows more. In the wonderful window at St. Neot's that tells us the story of the creation, we may see the medieval serpent with virgin face and yellow hair, the death of Cain at the hands of Lamech, who mistook his hairy body for that of a wild beast; and Seth placing the apple-pips, that we shall name directly, in the mouth and nostrils of the dying Adam.

The story I tell comes from the *Gwreans* and

the *Origo*. When Adam is cast from Paradise, God promises that before the end of the world he will grant to him the oil of mercy. When he is dying he bids Seth 'go from hence to Paradise and seek it.' Seth does not know the way, but is told that he will find it by following the tracks of his father's feet, burnt into the accursed earth, along the road where, since he came thence, no plant has grown.

Seth reaches Paradise, and asks the oil of the cherub at the gate, who bids him approach and look into the garden. Seth does so, and in the *Origo* we have the following dialogue :

CHERUB. Within the gate of Paradise,
Tell me, what sawest thou ?
SETH. The beauty of the vision
No mortal tongue can tell—
The fairest fruit, the brightest flowers,
Music that thrilled me through,
A fount of water, silvery pure,
Whence flowed four streams.
A lofty tree with many a bough
Stretched to bright heaven,
But bare and leafless.
No bark it had from stem to top,
And, as I looked, I saw its roots
Into dark hell descending.
CHERUB. Look yet again ; you have not seen it all.
SETH. There is a serpent in the tree,
Hideous and horrible.
CHERUB. Look a third time more closely.
Seest thou nought else ?
SETH. Oh, Cherub, angel of the gracious God,
High midst the branches of the tree
I see a little babe new born
All wrapped in swaddling clothes.

CHERUB. That is the Son of God.
Thy father and thy mother, too,
And all their kin, shall be redeemed by Him
When the right time shall come.
He is the oil to Adam promised ;
His death shall save the world.

In *Gwreans an bys* the scene is similar, except that enfolded in the roots, writhing in agony, Seth sees his brother Cain. The angel gives Seth three pips from the apple, and bids him place one in the mouth and one in each of the nostrils of the dying Adam, and tells him that from them shall grow a tree that will for ever yield the oil of mercy. Seth does as bidden, and so plants the tree whose history runs through the whole of the plays until it forms the cross. Moses finds on a mountain three twigs, whose savour is sweeter than all the herbs of the earth. He hails them as an emblem of the Trinity, cuts them, and they become the rod with which he brings water from the rock, and performs many another miracle. As death comes on him, he plants them on Mount Tabor, whence they are fetched to Jerusalem by David at the command of Gabriel, who tells him they will be needed for the crucifixion of the Son of Man. He brings them home, and plants them, when they grow together into one. Beneath its branches David begins the psalm 'Beatus Vir,' (Blessed is the man). The workmen of Solomon would build its timber into the temple, but it will not fit, being always by miracle too long or too short. Much impressed, Solomon orders it to be placed in the temple and worshipped. In some

way that I do not understand it gives offence to the 'bishop' who is persecuting Maximilla, and is ordered to be carried out to a pit at Bethsaida. This is done, and the water in the pit at once acquires the power of healing. (There seems to be a confusion of Bethsaida and Bethesda here.) The bishop then orders it to be laid as a bridge across the Cedron. Here it rests till from it are made the crosses for Christ, as also for the two thieves, the executioners selecting it because they believe it to be accursed. The refusal of the wood to fit the body to be nailed to it leads to a scene of brutality such as only a people hardened to sights of suffering could tolerate without pain.

This has carried us on to the second play of the *Ordinalia*, the *Passion of our Lord.* This play opens with 'The Temptation,' and closes with the embalming and burial of Christ. The scene that introduces the Temptation is well written, but is rather marred by constant speeches interspersed, in which Christ points the moral of the various incidents. But it must be remembered that none of these were *plays* in the modern sense; they were rather a series of tableaux illustrated by the speech or singing of the persons taking part in them. Moreover, this opening portion is in a different metre from the rest of the play, and possibly constituted a musical introduction. The object was edification, and this explains a good many speeches that would otherwise seem out of place. The worst offenders in the matter of this obtrusive didacticism are the plays known as the Coventry cycle. The Chester plays, on the other

hand, which are of a far higher tone than most, omit all this from the plays themselves, and serve the religious purpose, with which these plays were all written, in a far more effective manner by a speech delivered at the end of each play by an officer known as the 'expositor.'

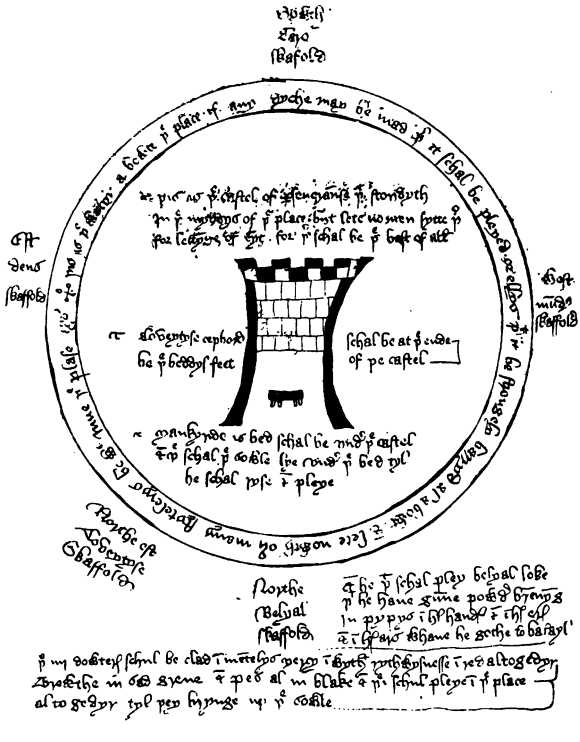
That the religious impression created by these plays was powerful, we have many evidences, perhaps none stranger than the fact that some of them are quoted to-day, though generally without consciousness of their source. For instance, the common childrens' prayer :

> 'Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,
> Guard the bed that I lie on.
> Four corners to my bed,
> Four angels round my head—
> One to watch, one to pray,
> And two to bear my soul away!'

comes from one of the Towneley mysteries. Words that have come to us across so many centuries must have appealed strongly when first uttered.

For the most part our Cornish play follows the Bible story fairly exactly, but in some ways it spoils it. Nothing can be more dignified and restrained than the language of the evangelists when describing the buffetings and indignities offered to Christ when on his trial. In the play that we are considering, as, indeed, in nearly all the miracle plays I know, the author has developed this in a scene of rude horse-play that, however it may have struck the medieval mind, is to a modern distasteful in the extreme.

Oddly enough this particular play omits the



PLAN FOR A MORALITY-PLAY.

(From Sharp's 'Coventry Mysteries.')

[*To face p.* 21.

very dramatic incident of the cock crowing on the denial by Peter. I can only notice a few scenes described from sources other than the Bible. The dream of Pilate's wife was inspired by Satan, who foresaw that the death of Christ meant the salvation of mankind and the harrowing of hell. When Judas hangs himself, his soul will not come out of his mouth because it cannot pass the lips that have kissed Christ. Satan intimates that the soul is his and he must get it anyhow. Tradition, preserved for us in many an old tale and poem, including the Cornish *Pascon agan Arluth* —*i.e.*, the Passion of our Lord, the poem that Gilbert called 'Mount Calvary'—tells us that devils tore him asunder and bore his wicked soul to hell.

The Cornish play has no stage direction, but perhaps we may assume the arrangement to have been the same as in a German play of which Professor Karl Hase tells us. Here Judas is hanged by the devil, the direction being, 'The devil must take care of the fastening, and sit behind him on the back of the gallows.' The devil then tears his coat down, and releases a black bird, which represents his foul soul. Devil and traitor slide down to hell together on a slanting rope. This is hardly realistic enough for the modern mind, but is quite as interesting symbolically as many an early work of art. And, speaking of symbolism, may I digress a minute to remind you of what a wealth of symbolism we have in our Cornish churches? To say nothing of the story of the passion that is portrayed for us again and

again, take a single set of benches in Launcells church, where there is nothing but symbol and not a trace of a human figure. Here you have the open jaw of a dragon (the *Harrowing of Hell*)—an empty tomb, at one end of which are 'the linen cloths laid by themselves' and three spice-boxes, (the visit of the three Maries to the tomb)—an empty grave and cross triumphant (the resurrection). Then you have the visit of Mary, when she mistook our Lord for the gardener, the whole story being told by a tree, a spade, and a spice-box—a table spread with viands (the supper at Emmaus), and so on. It was not that our ancestors were more ignorant than ourselves that they found beauty and instruction in such things as these; it was because the hurry of life had not killed their imagination.

But to return to our play. Nails being needed for the crucifixion, a smith is appealed to. He says his hands are too sore to work; his wife abuses him, saying his statement is false, and she bids him blow and she will make the nails. He shows his hands, and they see he cannot do even this; or, as the poem of the Passion tells us, 'On his hands they saw disease, although, in fact, there was none.' The smith declares his faith in the divinity of Christ and slips away, leaving the wife to make the nails while the executioners blow, the lady and the soldiers indulging in a good deal of squabbling, meant perhaps for the groundlings.*

* There is no reference in the plays to the subsequent history of these nails—their discovery by Helena, their use by Constantine, and the subsequent possession of one of them by King Athelstan.

In the *poem* of the Passion (though not in the *play*) we find the pretty legend of the coat of Christ. The Bible tells us, 'They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots.' The minds of the faithful pondered over this special treatment of the vesture till they evolved the story that this garment had been made for Christ by his mother while he was still a suckling, and had grown with his growth.

The names of the two thieves crucified with Christ are given as Dysmas and Jesmas, which are nearly the same as those in the apocryphal gospel.

We have, too, the story of the blind soldier, Longis, who is brought to pierce the Saviour's side, so that the water and blood flow on his hand, which he wipes across his eyes and sees, at once breaking out into a declaration of belief.

It is noticeable that there is in this play no trace of the worship of Mary, or any recognition of her as other than a good woman blessed as the mother of the Lord. The poem *Pascon agan Arluth*, which is in so many ways akin to this play, differs much in this respect and frequently exalts Mary, telling us that in heaven the angels rise before her and even her son offers her worship. In another respect, also, the two greatly differ—the *drama* closes with an exhortation to the people to ponder on the Passion, to love Christ, and to act as he would have them act; the *poem* counts the wounds of Christ, and bids us repeat each day

so many *Pater Nosters* as will in the course of a year make up the number of Christ's wounds.

The third play of the *Ordinalia* deals with the Resurrection, and in the existing copy has tacked on to it what is evidently another play—the death of Pilate.

The most interesting part of this play is that dealing with 'The Harrowing of Hell,' a very favourite subject in medieval times, and one presented to us in many an old picture.

Indeed, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century it was a favourite with religious artists. Sometimes Christ knocks at the brazen gates of hell; sometimes he lifts Adam and the others from a deep chasm in the ground; sometimes he draws them from the jaws of a huge dragon, in each case the limbo being full of flame and smoke, that show it to have been a place of torture. I am not sure how the Cornish hell was represented, but it was clearly some wonderful affair. In *Gwreans an bys* the stage direction says, 'Let hell gape when the father nameth it.' In Mrs. Jameson's 'History of our Lord' are many illustrations well worth study; indeed, the miracle plays can only be properly enjoyed if early religious art is studied with them, and for those of us who cannot travel to see originals Mrs. Jameson's works are essential. In one of the windows of St. Kew church may be seen a representation of the harrowing, where hell is represented by the flaming dragon's jaw. I am unaware of any scriptural authority for this, and the source of the stories seems to be the apocryphal gospel of Nicodemus, a strange work that, like

the other apocryphal story of the Infancy of Jesus, degrades the gospel story in the most awful manner.

I am not, of course, going to enter into any discussion of the subject. My aim is a simple one—namely, to tell you what our Cornish ancestors were taught about it in this play, which follows the gospel of Nicodemus far more closely than do most of the *English* examples. The subject is treated in the York cycle with great detail in a play of over 400 lines. As the Saviour approaches the gates of hell the people that walked in darkness see a great light, and the light shines upon them that dwelt in the land of the shadow of death. Adam, who says he has been there 4,600 years, Isaiah, David, Symeon, the Baptist and others recognise the light as the fulfilment of prophecy, and raise such a cheer that the devils are alarmed lest they should break loose. Ultimately the harrowing takes place much as in our Cornish play, the less charitable view being taken, that only *some* of the occupants of that dread abode were pardoned and released.

In our Cornish play we pass from a scene in which Pilate is taking every precaution to prevent the removal of the body, especially by the imprisonment of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, and encouraging the soldiers to extra watchfulness by a promise of Penryn and Helston as their reward, to the arrival of the spirit of Christ at the gates of hell. Christ at once calls on the devils to open the gates that the king of joy may enter in, and Lucifer asks: 'Who is the king of joy.' 'It

is the Lord, strong and mighty, he is the King of joy,' and forthwith the gates are shattered, and Christ enters hell. There is a dispute between Lucifer and Beelzebub, the latter recognising the uselessness of fighting against the inevitable. This use of the twenty-fourth psalm is taken from the gospel of Nicodemus, but the 'king of glory' becomes in our Cornish drama the 'king of joy.' In the York and Towneley mysteries David tauntingly reminds the devil of his prophecy.

During the quarrel between Beelzebub and Lucifer a demon named Tulfric makes some remarks that I do not fully understand, but they clearly intimate that he is concerned in some way in the *cooking of souls;* which recalls that in *Gwreans an bys* a devil wished to carry Adam to the deepest pit of hell, called the 'kitchen,' but was unable to take him further than a cloister on the upper side.* I do not recall Tulfric in any other play.

Christ then brings Adam and Eve, and the others who 'have done the will of my father' to the earth. Adam meets Enoch and Elijah, and is puzzled because he had never seen them in hell. They tell him of their translation, Enoch explains that in three and a half days he will die and go to heaven, and Elijah that he will live till he shall be slain in the war with Antichrist. Adam then turns to Dysmas, the good thief, who explains how it was that he went straight to Paradise. Then follow the rescue by angels of Nicodemus and Joseph from prison—the interview of Christ and

* Ll. 2,010 to 2,045.

Mary, his promise to her of a seat by him in heaven, and the discovery of the empty tomb by the four soldiers. In this last scene there is a distinct effort at a dramatic differentiation of their characters, which was no doubt traditional, for it is found also in the York and Towneley, and other collections. In the visit of the Maries to the tomb we have a song in *English* that was no doubt well-known to the audience.

> 'Ellas mornyngh y syngh mornyng y cal
> Our Lord ys deyd that bogthe ovs al.'

In the scene between Mary Magdalene and the gardener are several quotations from the Vulgate, such as 'Mulier noli me tangere' (woman, touch me not), and so on, inserted between the speeches. They form no part of the speeches of the characters, and I think must have been spoken by the 'ordinary' (as Carew calls the director of the piece) acting as an expositor, or perhaps sung by a chorus. It is clear that in the York play of the Annunciation an officer so acted. The latin would no doubt be familiar to the audience from having been often heard in the services of the church.

The play of the Resurrection closes with the solution of the doubts of Thomas, and we pass to what is evidently another play, though in the manuscript it appears as if part of the same. One of the prettiest legends of early times is that of the woman who, standing in a doorway as Jesus passed by bearing the cross, was so moved at his suffering that she stepped out and wiped his brow with her handkerchief, finding as she drew it

back that it bore the image—the *vera icon*—of the Saviour. She at once gave herself up to good work, working in Rome with St Peter and St. Paul until she suffered martyrdom under Nero. Some say that the name Vera icon (I am not responsible for this barbarous language, it is that of the legend) was transferred from the cloth to its possessor; others that her name was Bernice, and that she was the woman healed of the issue of blood. At any rate her story is as old as the fifth century, and has a firm hold on Christian art and tradition.

She is honoured as St. Veronica, a painted cloth in her chapel at St. Peter's in Rome passing with the simple as the original. Of the Veronica cloth there is an interesting medieval representation in one of the windows of Breage church. In our Cornish plays she appears as Vernona, and is, I am sorry to say, divested of all poetical associations, being figured as a bloodthirsty virago. Tiberius Cæsar is ill of leprosy, and it is this incident that introduces the play of the death of Pilate. Tiberius sends to Pilate to bring Jesus to him that he may cure him. Pilate seeks for him, and his messenger meets Veronica and learns of Christ's death. He is in despair until Veronica says *she* will go with him and cure the emperor. She shows Tiberius the cloth, bidding him believe and he will be cured. He prays, kisses the handkerchief, and is restored to health. She calls on him in return to slay Pilate, and he orders accordingly. Pilate is brought, but none can harm or even hold him long, and Veronica explains that he bears a

charmed life, so long as he has on next his skin the vestment in which Christ was crucified. After long disputing, Pilate removes it, and Tiberius is about to slay him with his sword when Veronica objects to so painless a death, and urges that it may be made as cruel as possible. She is disappointed, for Pilate stabs himself in the gaol. He is buried, but the earth rejects him again and again. Veronica suggests that he shall be placed in an iron box and thrown into the Tiber. This is done, and it is found that to bathe in the Tiber, or even to pass over it, spells instant death. A thousand people having thus perished, the body, again on the advice of Veronica, is taken up and carried far out to sea; it hits against a rock which opens, the devils seize him and he is carried to hell, to the accompaniment of a song in which Tulfric sings treble, and Beelzebub and Satan bass. There is some tradition of Pilate in connection with his rock at Fowey and the Pontius cross, but I do not exactly recall it. It is a curious fact that whereas in Cornwall (except in the poem Pascon agan Arluth) Pilate is most unfavourably portrayed, in most other plays he is treated very leniently.

The scene of the ascension of Christ to heaven, and his welcome there is told simply and well. The only thing that strikes me as noticeable is that the angels are represented as having no knowledge of what had been happening on the earth.

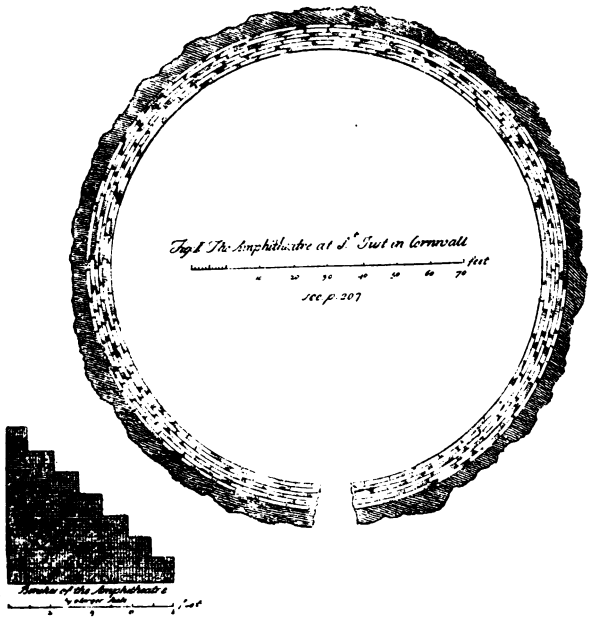
The whole closes with an exhortation by the emperor to the audience, bidding them ponder what they had seen and heard. He invites them to join in a dance and then go home.

The next play that I purpose noticing is the only real 'miracle play'—a play, that is, confined to the doings of a saint—that we have in Cornish. This play, *Beunans Meriasek* (or the life of Meriasek), is, I think, the most interesting of all.

It is far fuller of English loan-words than the *Ordinalia*, and competent students of the language pronounce its date to be between them and *Gwreans an bys*.* It is considered to be of the late fifteenth century, but the only manuscript of it known to exist was written by one Dom Hadton in 1504. The subject was the patron saint of Camborne church, and the places named in it are, with very few exceptions, either around Camborne or around Penryn. This makes one look for the author (or perhaps translator and adaptor from a Breton play) among the canons of Glasney church, Penryn, and it is worth noting that in 1501 Alexander Penhylle exchanged the rectory of Camborne with John Nans for the provostship of Glasney. Either of these men may well have had a hand in the composition. One of the reasons that make me think it was a translation, and not an original composition, is that the saint's name appears both in its Breton form *Meriadoc* and in its Cornish form *Meriasek*. Moreover, it is clear that the translator had only an imperfect vocabulary of Cornish, as he is often reduced to use an English word. Scraps of French, too, occur, but that was a fashion elsewhere as well.

The play opens with the sending to school of

* For Norris's view of the meaning of the introduction of English words see 'Cornish Drama,' vol. ii., p. 464.



PLÂN-AN-GUARE AT ST. JUST, IN PENWITH.

(From Borlase's 'Antiquities of Cornwall.')

[*To face p.* 34.

our young hero, the only son of a duke of Brittany. He is welcomed by a very pompous master who, to show his learning, mentions that when drunk he always talks Latin, which, you will recollect, was also a characteristic of Chaucer's *Somnour*. He exhibits the proficiency of his pupils, the most skilled of whom thus shows his talents :

> 'God help A, B, and C ;
> The end of my song is D.
> No more is known by me,'

but promises to learn more after dinner. This word leads to an adjournment for all but Meriasek, who retires to the chapel after addressing the others :

> 'Good it is at times
> To think of the soul,
> Meditating on the Passion
> Whereby Christ made us whole
> To Jesus will I pray,
> Who gave his life for mine,
> And to his mother Mary
> Before I drink or dine.'

The master cordially approves the sentiment, and walks straight away to his dinner, thereby acting as we are all apt to act, and as men have acted from the beginning.

On Meriasek's returning home, the fame of his learning and virtue having preceded him, the king comes to visit his father. After everyone has buttered the boy up in a way that would destroy the humility of any but a saint, the king offers the young man a wealthy princess as a wife. Meriasek, however, declines, stating that he in-

tends to join some order. As usual in such cases, those who had so bepraised him now turned on him, and let him understand pretty plainly that he is a mere fool. His father says:

> 'All men shall mock at us!
> For who shall have our wealth
> Unless you married are
> And children have?'

And Meriasek replies:

> 'Father, make Christ your heir,
> Or to your kin your substance give.
> It's nought to me; I'll never touch
> Your riches while I live.
> I shall not miss the wealth of earth
> If I can win a home in heaven.'

He then denounces wealth for others too. King Conan gets uneasy—

> 'Sirs, let us hence. I grieve that I came here.
> Do'st thou think, villain, that a rich man ne'er
> Can get to heaven? Surely thou must be mad!'

Father and mother, however, relent. His father says:

> 'Into God's hands I commit thy care.
> Obey thy thoughts. I can do nought but bless thee.'

And his mother:

> 'Amen ever, and my blessing too!
> Kiss me, my son. Oh, it is sad to lose you!'

Meriasek then assumes the priestly garb, is consecrated and, by prayer, restores a blind man's sight and a cripple's wholeness of limb. He sails for

Cornwall and lands safely at Camborne. He looks for a chapel of St. Mary, to whom throughout the play he is especially devoted—a fact that accounts for the position that the virgin mother occupies in this play, which is the only one that the most vehement objector could accuse of containing any Mary worship.

Having found her chapel, he decides to erect his own oratory alongside of it. He finds, however, that water is scarce, and by prayer produces a well that, until destroyed by the town drainage of Camborne, was known as Meriasek's well, those who frequented it being called *Meriasekers.* He acquired for it the power of allaying madness, and its destroyers have, perhaps, a good deal to answer for. He performs some further miracles of healing, which come to the ears of Teudar, the traditional tyrant of Cornwall, who had castles at Les-teader in St. Kevern and Goodren in Kea. Fearful lest these miracles should interfere with the cult of Mahound, he starts with a band of soldiers to chastise Mariasek.

(I may note in passing that in the miracle plays, not of Cornwall only, Mahound or Mahomet stands for heathenism generally. Even Herod swears by Mahomet, and Tiberius holds services in his favour.)

Teudar demands to know what is Meriasek's faith, and that worthy sets out the leading doctrines of Christianity in a few simple words evidently meant more for the audience than for Teudar. A discussion follows on several difficult theological points which the disputants apparently

as little understood as most people nowadays. Teudar is of course worsted, and exclaims :

> 'No good can come of argument
> Though it do last for aye.
> I'll be thy truest friend
> If thou wilt Christ deny.
> A bishop I will make thee,
> The whole wide country o'er—
> This only do I ask thee,
> My god, Mahound, to adore.'

Meriasek retorts that the argument may quite as easily be concluded by Teudar's worshipping Christ. Both parties lose their temper, and Teudar sets his men on to Meriasek. Our saint succeeds in hiding beneath a rock, and as soon as he can venture out takes sail for Brittany. The scene indicates as well as any the difference of these plays from the modern drama. The author was never troubled with the laws of the unities, even supposing he had ever heard of them. 'With imagined wing our swift scene flies, in motion of no less celerity than that of thought.' Meriasek says : 'I will to the sea, there to take ship,' and in the same breath, without a hint of change of scene, 'Hail to thee, best of mariners! Art bound for Brittany? If so, I'll gladly go with thee.' They sail off, and the speech is ended on the other side of the water ! As soon as he is landed, and no doubt to the intense delight of a rustic audience, he tames a savage man-eating wolf and dismisses it to the forest unhurt, with an injunction never again to harm a human being. He retires to a mountain, where he may live as a

hermit, and builds a chapel to St. Mary. The stage direction here is quaint: 'Chappel aredy. Her a weryth a rosset mantell and a berde.' If in real life *cucullus non facit monachum*, on the stage a russet mantle and a beard go a long way in the making of a hermit. During his life as a hermit he is fed by angels, who ascend and descend to music.

At this point and elsewhere are interpolated portions of a play of the life of Pope Silvester, but they are so unconnected with the life of Meriasek that I purpose noting them together afterwards.

Then follows a scene introduced by the stage instruction 'Here outlaws shall parade, or one for all.'

We then return to Meriasek, whom we find the earl of Rohan and others eagerly seeking. They find him fasting and in a horse-hair shirt. Rohan makes some sensible remarks to the effect that he believes it is possible to be virtuous without ceasing to be useful, and Meriasek yields so far as to consent to return to the world, and rid it of the outlaws. He casts fire amongst them, and in their fright they confess their sins, and are dismissed with a warning that they offend no more. Rohan is delighted, and announces that the outlaws being out of the way, the fair can be held in safety.

The scene then shifts to Cornwall, the duke of which country marches against Teudar, who has not only driven away Meriasek, but has announced his intention of exterminating the Christians.

The two chiefs summon their forces, the duke's being (for stage purposes) twenty armed men with 'streamers,' and Teudar's fifteen. After a slanging match in which they abuse each other like fish women, and brag like Russian generals, they fight and Teudar is defeated, in spite of the personal assistance of 'Belzebuc' and other demons.

The first part of the play then closes with the usual invitation to drink and dance before parting, and to come again early next day.

Meanwhile, Meriasek is making himself popular by healing blind folk and so on. In the case of a man obsessed by a devil, the evil spirit stands by him on the stage until exorcised. So popular does the saint become that on the death of the bishop of Vannes, rich and poor alike cry out for him to succeed. All goes well, the pope gladly approves, and the bulls are issued, but Meriasek declines, and only at length yields under great pressure. His objection is one that would receive more sympathy from a medieval than from a modern audience. A worthy canon tells him that the position is worth £300 a year, and is told in reply that he is like too many other clergymen who seek benefices not to save souls, but for the sake of the income. Meriasek wants no riches and shrinks from the responsibility of a cure. He has all he can do to save one soul—his own—and may God grant him to rule that rightly. As soon as he is ordained he acts in the most unconventional manner, and terribly scandalizes his chaplain and other such, by condescending to assist the poor and suffering, though he is warned that such folk

should be kept at a proper distance. The play closes with Meriasek's death, after he has appointed the first Tuesday in June as his feast day. (It is still on June 7.) The stage direction offers another example of the way in which everything, no matter how supernatural or invisible, was attempted to be imaged in concrete form: 'The holy goste aredy fro hevyn to fètt the sowle and the soule aredy'—perhaps represented by a bird as in the case of Judas. I gather from the closing speech addressed to the audience that the play was to be repeated.

> 'Come join the players in a drink before you go,
> And, pipers, strike a tune and let us dance.
> Go ye or stay, right welcome shall ye be—
> Aye, though ye stay a week!'

As I have already mentioned, the course of this play is frequently interrupted by another and quite separate play. Whether this latter is introduced for the amusement of the gallery or what I do not know; it is, at any rate, full of the romping noisiness that with many supplies the place of humour. It is a most melodramatic piece. Constantine parades, and tells us what a really wonderful man he is; he massacres some Christians, who are duly buried by Pope Silvester; is seized with leprosy, the stage directions being 'a vysour aredy apon Constantyn ys face.' A scene of wild and hopelessly vulgar fun follows, in which the chief actor is a quack doctor's clerical assistant, rejoicing in the highly unclassical, but very interesting name of 'Bachelor Jenkyn.'

The interest of this scene lies in the fact that the doctor was usually the clown of our Cornish plays in the last century, such as *St. George*, to which I shall presently allude, and that he was always called 'Little John,' which is, of course, the same as Jenkyn or Jankyn. Then a heathen bishop orders a bath of childrens' blood, and directions are given for the slaughter of 3,000, the little ones being duly brought in by their own mothers. The brutal jests of the executioners, the wailing of the mothers and the sight of the children, make Constantine relent and refuse to be cured at such a price. St. Peter and St. Paul are then sent from heaven to cure the emperor, whom they bid seek Pope Silvester on Mount Soracte, that he may by him be washed clean.

Silvester baptizes him in holy water, a marvellous splendour of light shines all about, and so, as the directions put it, 'the vysour away.' Of course, Constantine is converted, and all goes well.

Next we have a fight with a dragon. The heathen bishop of Pola decides to go hunting, and insists on his chaplain coming too, though the latter has not dined. The chaplain's curse is one that is frequent in the play, and was probably a stock one in West Cornwall—'A molleth du in gegen' (God's curse in the 'kitchen'). Whether the domestic kitchen or the lowest room in hell that went by that name is not clear.

A live stag is hunted, the dogs rejoicing in such names as Lap Keryn, Black Bert, Scurel Wyrly, and so on. Then appears the dragon, a formidable beast, with a gun in its mouth and fire, and

the fun becomes fast and furious. Soldiers attack it, and are swallowed alive; two dukes are slain by her breath (it was a hen dragon). All agree that the evil is the result of Constantine's conversion, and Constantine sends for Sylvester. St. Peter comes down from heaven, and gives the pope a prescription for dragon-taming; it is duly applied, the dragon slinks away, the two dukes are restored, and there is a wholesale conversion.

Mixed up again with this play is the story of a pious young man, who was thrown into gaol and about to be executed. His mother steals the image of Christ from the Virgin's arms, and only restores it after the Virgin has herself rescued the young man from gaol, opening the doors without difficulty, and, oddly enough, assuring her protégé that she did it without the use of false keys.

Incidentally we learn from a slave, who is offering a tom-cat as a propitiatory sacrifice to Jove that the people of Morvelys (I suppose Morval) once anointed the devil, which is going even further than Redruth men, who only crowned the donkey.*

To a modern mind it is hard to take all this seriously, but I am not at all sure that it was not so to the medieval mind, or that it would not be so to many a country audience of to-day.

Before I close I will refer only to one or two

* Tradition alleges that the inhabitants of Redruth celebrated the coronation of one of the Georges by thus treating a donkey. Whether the king or the donkey had just cause of complaint is difficult to say.

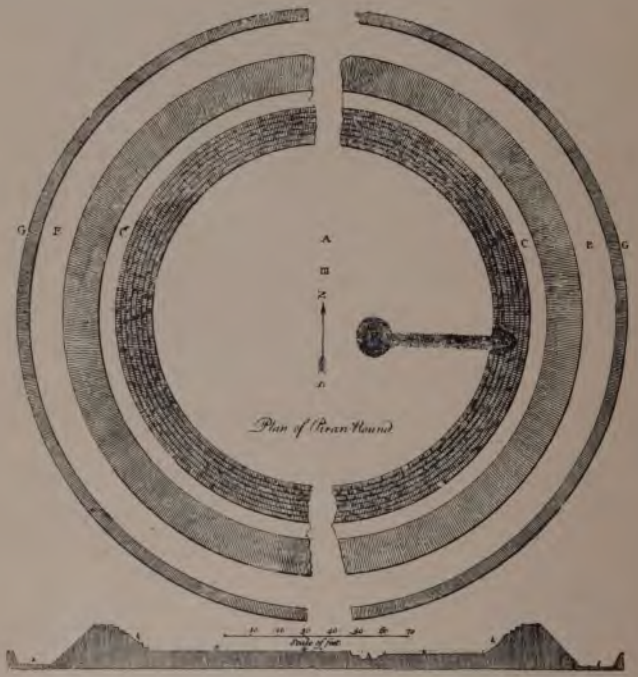
matters that apply to all these plays so far as is known. In the first place, they were provided by the authorities, church or lay, and the audience paid nothing. Indeed in 1328 all who witnessed the Chester mysteries were promised 1,000 days of pardon from the pope and 40 from the bishop of Chester. They were an outcome of the healthy communal life of early times. The accounts of the borough authority of St. Ives record receipts from the interludes, and in 1575 we find 'Item, spent upon the carpenter that made heaven, 4d.,' which is certainly not extravagant. A few extracts from old accounts will give a fair idea of how the stage was decked and the play presented. They are not Cornish instances, but probably by one you can judge the other :

'Payd to Fawston for mending the wind, iid.' ; 'paid for a pair of gloves for God'; 'dyvers necessaries for the trymminge of the Father of Heaven'; 'paid to the players for rehearsal . . .'; 'item, for keeping fyer at Hell's mouth, iijd.'

This last item seems cheap, but the next is more startling—'5d. for setting the world on fire.' I suppose there was danger attaching to this, because 'for making of iij worlds' only ijs. was paid. In the same accounts we find 'Payd for the baryll for the yerthquake' and 'payd for starch to make the storm.'* One entry I fail to understand, but it is suggestive : 'Item, two worms of conscience : payd for a cord for the wynd, ijd'—apparently a mechanical contrivance.

In one place we find a payment for 'halfe a

* Clarke, 'Miracle Play in England,' p. 74.



PLÂN-AN-GUARE AT PERRAN.

(From Borlase's 'Natural History of Cornwall'.)

[*To face p.* 45.

yarde of Rede Sea,' reminding us that the scenes were painted, and bore the names of the places in large letters. Amongst the many purposes conjectured for the trench that formerly crossed the plan-an-guare at Perran is that it represented the sea. In the play of Meriasek there must, I think, have been some such contrivance when the saint crossed to and from Brittany and Cornwall.

The costumes seem to have been at times extraordinary. For one play, acted at Coventry about 1591, and probably seen by Shakespeare, who perhaps refers to it when he speaks of 'out-Heroding Herod,' that worthy is dressed to correspond to his bombastic speeches.

Amongst the entries in the accounts we find—'to a payntour for peyntyng . . . Herode's face'; 'peyd to a peynter for peyntyng and mendyng of Herode's heed, iiijd.' His painted and stained gown cost 13s. 7d., a large sum in those days, and, in addition, he had a crest of iron, three new plates for which cost 4d. The dresses of the higher personages were generally clerical, both Christ and the Jewish high priest wearing the garb of an English bishop. The subordinate players wore their ordinary custumes; the inhabitants of hell wore close-fitting shirts, and had tails and often horns. Children at times appeared in the costume of Eden. Most of the objectionable characters had red hair—a colour that the medieval Englishman abhorred. He believed it to have been the colour of Judas' hair. (Those of you who have seen the medieval alabasters at

Mabe will recollect that all the executioners of the martyred bishop have red hair.) As late as 1783 at Bamberg, in Germany, in the mystery play of 'The Creation,' the Almighty was personated by a Capuchin, in a full-bottomed wig, a false beard, and a brocade dressing-gown. In England God was usually dressed in white, and, until it was found to be injurious, his face was gilded.* In the accounts to which I referred just now we find—'Item for mending the white and black soules coates, viijd.'

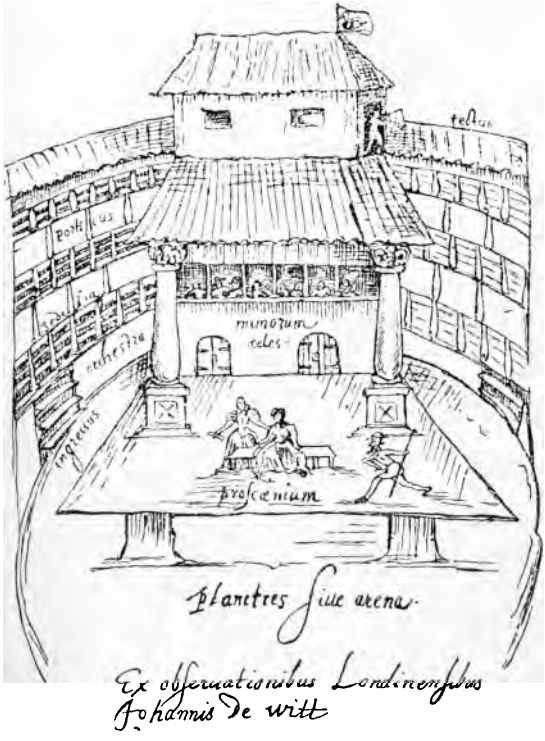
The connection of the miracle play with the later drama is not easy to trace. Nor do I purpose referring to it, except so far as Cornwall is concerned. The guise dancers, who may still be found in a degenerate form in out of the way places, are descendants of the old players. There are some who can recall the wonderful performance of St. George, who fought the dragon.

> 'I slew the dragon *he*,
> And brought him to the slaughter,
> By which I gained fair Sabra,
> The King of Egypt's daughter'—

an interesting event, which, like so much else, is depicted in St. Neot's window, and on the wall of St. Just Church. He also fought a Turkish knight, and inflicted on him grievous hurt. Seeing the poor man about to die, he exclaimed :

> 'Where can a mediciner be found
> To heal this dark and deadly wound?'

* See Pollard's 'English Miracle Plays,' XXVII.



THE SWAN THEATRE, 1616.

(From Ordish's 'Early London Theatres.')

[*To face p.* 46.

A doctor arrives, but can effect no cure. In his anger George cuts off the doctor's head, and the Turk at once recovers—in which is a sound moral!

It is very difficult to fix the date of this play of *St. George*. It is opened by Father Christmas: 'Here come I, old Father Christmas, welcome or welcome not,' which sounds like a protest against the forbiddal of Christmas observance in 1652, but there is much in it that suggests an earlier date. From time to time much has been added and altered, until its historical incidents are hopelessly mixed up. We have the incident of Henry V and the tennis balls, followed by the seizure of Quebec by that prince, it being defended by the French king with the aid of a Spanish fleet; and the subsequent seizure by Henry of the crown of Spain, and in all this George of Cappadocia plays a part! The Cornish love of a 'good talker' appears in a description of St. George:

'St. George is at the door and swears he will come in,
With sword and buckler by his side, I fear he'll pierce my skin.
I know he is no fool, I know he is some stout;*
Why, he'll say more by one inch of candle than I can perform while ten pounds burn out.'

A friend tells me he well recollects as a child that the performers borrowed mats on which to die!†

* 'Some stout.' This use of 'some' for 'very' is still frequent.

† See *Gentleman's Magazine*, June, 1830, and W. Sandy's 'Christmas Carols' (London, 1830).

Even more degenerate, yet still a survival, are some of the sacred plays occasionally performed in rural chapels. Not many years ago, in a village in west Cornwall, were two rival chapels. One announced a play of 'Joseph and his brethren,' Joseph to have thirteen colours in his coat. The opposition at once announced the same play, but with fourteen colours in the coat. So it progressed till we had Joseph with seventeen colours in his coat, and the opposition announced 'Joseph with always one more colour in his coat than the other!' And so we part with our old Cornish drama, not, perhaps of much interest in itself, but surely of value as showing us something of our ancestors, what they thought, what they believed, and how they enjoyed themselves.

In closing let me say that I am conscious of having only touched a small part of a great subject. The origin of miracle plays, their development, the varying relations of church and stage, the gradual decay and disappearance of these early plays, and their replacement by the political plays of the time of Henry VIII, and later by the rich drama of Shakspeare and Jonson, of Peele and Marlowe, and the rest of the great writers that made our literature from Elizabeth to James II; these things are worth study, but cannot be all dealt with at once. The stage was never more worth study than at present, when a strong reaction is showing itself in favour of more recitation and less stage business—in favour, that is, of a return to earlier methods.

And in dealing with plays in the Cornish

tongue some of you may have expected that I should deal with the history of that tongue's decay, and with the metre of the plays. In doing so I should have been met with obvious difficulties. First, my knowledge of the tongue itself is of the smallest, and to read a line without a dictionary is beyond my power. The history of the language's decay would take an hour by itself, and the discussion of the metre would be little likely to interest my audience. Suffice it to say, for the benefit of those who care, that the prevailing metre is trochaic dimeter catalectic.*

I think that justifies my crying, 'Turnestatha,' which is to say 'Good-night.'

* Dr. Burlase.

THE END

Elliot Stock, 62, Paternoster Row, London, E.C.

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